

Reaching the End of the Tunisian Consensus: Disaffection and Pending Challenges

Miguel Hernando de Larramendi

Research Group on Arab and Muslim Societies
(GRESAM)
University of Castilla-La Mancha

Bosco Govantes

University Pablo de Olavide, Seville

Throughout 2018, Tunisia has been witness to a process of disaffection towards its institutions and political class, revealing the limits of the consensus the country's political life has revolved around in recent years.

Although the Constitution provides for a semi-presidentialist political system, the consensual dynamic generated between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda after the 2014 legislative elections has allowed Beji Caid Essebsi to strengthen the role of the President of the Republic (Gobe, 2017). Elected by universal suffrage, and therefore with the personal legitimacy that the ballot box provides, he pushed for the formation of coalition governments of national unity, but without strong political leadership. The efforts of successive heads of government to achieve a more autonomous role have been a source of friction throughout his mandate. Thus, the dismissal of Habib Essid, a technocrat that led the government between 2015 and 2016, did nothing to stop these tensions continuing with his successor at the head of the National Unity Government, Youssef Chahed (Gobe, 2018). These strains, together with the worsening economic situation and the absence of responses to the regional imbalances and inequalities at the heart of the 2011 revolution, have contributed to widening the rift between the population and the political elite, a situation reflected in the survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2018, according to which 81% of Tunisians did not identify with any political party (Afrobarometer, 2018).

The Limits of an Asymmetric Cohabitation

The government alliance between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda was set up following the 2014 legislative elections, in a hostile regional context for Islamist movements after Morsi's ousting in Egypt. It alleviated the climate of identity polarization between Islamists and modernists, which almost derailed the transition process in 2013. In 2016, the Carthage Agreement extended this alliance to other political and social actors and opened the door to the formation of a national unity government, tasked with running an agreed-upon programme aimed at bolstering the economy, government efficiency and the fight against terrorism.

Ennahda opted for a self-limiting strategy, accepting its diminished influence in the successive Nidaa Tounes-led governments, despite the comparatively high number of lawmakers it had in the Parliament. Notwithstanding this asymmetric cohabitation, however, mutual distrust remains between the two parties, which, in turn, has slowed down the adoption of economic and social reforms, as well as prevented consensus on key issues related to the drafting of the Constitution in 2014. Five years after it was pronounced, the Constitutional Court is yet to be created, due to the failure of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) to elect its designated four members. This distrust also delayed approval of the Local Authorities Law until April 2018, passed just 10 days before the first local elections following the fall of Ben Ali. This delay and the law's subsequent regulatory development reflect the central government's reluctance to develop the principles of positive discrimination in favour of the less developed regions, as enshrined in the Constitution. The management of Tunisia's regions continues to be overseen by an unelected governor, who acts as an intermedi-

ary between democratically elected town councils and the central State, with no date set by the government for holding regional elections (Yerkes and Ben Yahmed, 2019). The distrust between both parties has also affected the functioning of the independent bodies created by the Constitution, such as the *Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections* (ISIE), tasked with organizing elections. Following the resignation of its president Mohamed Tlili Mansri, after the local elections, the Parliament took seven months to appoint a successor. Nabil Baffoun was elected president of the body in January 2019, with just 9 months remaining before the legislative and presidential elections set for the autumn.

2018 Tunisian Local Elections

Having been postponed on several occasions, one of 2018's milestones was the country's first local elections since the revolution, a first step in the transformation of a state with a long centralist tradition. The election of new town councils enabled the replacement of the "special delegations," which had provisionally managed local affairs since 2011, with democratically elected local bodies.

The election law reform allowed members of the army and security forces to exercise their right to vote for the first time. Voting for women was encouraged through new measures. In addition to vertical parity, horizontal parity was ensured through a requirement for half the lists presented by political parties across the nation to be headed by women. These measures contributed to the fact that 47.5% of councillors were women. The presence of women in municipal government institutions was also fostered by the Local Authorities Law, which established that the positions of mayor and deputy mayor in local councils had to be occupied by a man and a woman respectively. The electoral law also established positive discrimination measures in favour of young people, requiring at least one out of the three first candidates of each list to be under 35 years old. In addition, the next six candidates also had to include at least one in the same age bracket. The participation of young people in local government has also been facilitated by the requirement that the mayor or their deputy be under 35 years old.

However, the introduction of these positive discrimination measures in favour of women and young peo-

ple did nothing to boost turnout at the ballot boxes, with the number of voters standing at 1,909,742, way below the turnout for the 2014 legislative elections, in which 3,579,257 citizens participated. The official participation rate, calculated based on the number of registered voters, was 35.7%; a figure that falls to 23.5% if calculations take into account the number of potential voters (Hernando de Larra-mendi and Govantes).

Voting for women was encouraged through new measures. These measures contributed to the fact that 47.5% of councillors were women

The deteriorating image of political parties, together with the weak base of many of them, was reflected in their struggle to present candidates for the country's 350 local councils. Only Ennahda was able to run in all of them, closely followed by Nidaa Tounes (345). The third biggest political party in terms of candidates presented was the Front Populaire (132). Another indicator of the disaffection towards political parties was the high number of independent lists that ran in the elections and the support they received. The 860 independent lists together received 32.3% of the votes nationwide, - surpassing all other parties in number of votes.

The election results show how support has diminished for the country's main political parties. Although Ennahda obtained 28.6% of the votes, it lost 430,000 voters with respect to the 2014 legislative elections. The party has held onto its hegemony in the country's south, with strong penetration in areas which, in 2014, had been won by Nidaa Tounes. Thanks to the support of many councillors from independent lists, the party led by Rachid Ghannouchi was able to take 36% of town councils, including the country's two biggest cities, Sfax and Tunis (ICG, 2019). Souad Abderrahim, who had already been an MP in 2011 in the National Constituent Assembly, thereby took the job of heading the country's capital. Nidaa Tounes, for its part, was severely punished by its electorate as a consequence of its alliance with

Ennahda and the infighting over the party's leadership. It obtained 20.9% of the vote, but lost 800,000 votes with respect to the 2014 legislative elections, with historic defeats in constituencies in Greater Tunis, such as Ariana or Ben Arous.

The Breaking of Consensus and the Reconfiguration of Alliances

The local election results highlighted the infighting within Nidaa Tounes, destabilized the national unity government and brought about a reconfiguration of alliances with a view to the legislative and presidential elections scheduled for 2019.

The widening rift between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, a prelude to the breaking of consensus between the two parties, could be seen in the process of drafting a new Carthage Agreement. Pushed forward by President Essebsi to address the political and economic crisis the country was still immersed in, the signing of the Carthage Agreement II was blocked by Ennahda's refusal to support Youssef Chahed's dismissal; a demand made by the President of the Republic with the backing of the country's biggest trade union, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), which opposed his programme of economic reforms. Support from Ennahda and the National Coalition Bloc, a parliamentary group led by defectors from Nidaa Tounes, has enabled Youssef Chahed to remain at the head of the cabinet and drive forward the creation of a new political party, Tahya Tounes.

The breakdown in consensus was made official in September 2018, when President Essebsi publicly announced the end of relations between Ennahda and the presidency in a television interview. The announcement of the split was preceded by the President's efforts to highlight the differences between his party and that led by Rached Ghannouchi in matters of identity linked with the role of religion in public life. In accordance with recommendations proposed by the Committee for Individual Liberties and Equality (COLIBE), created in 2017 at the President's request, Essebsi announced his support, in August 2018, for a law that would ensure equal inheritance rights for men and women, a proposal that was rejected by Ennahda's Shura Council.

Ennahda's support was also decisive in November for Youssef Chahed to go ahead with a partial cabi-

net reshuffle. Although it did not affect key portfolios, such as the defence and foreign affairs ministries, the changes were openly criticized by the President of the Republic, who said they were organized without prior consultation. The replacement of 13 ministers and five state secretaries did not change the balance of power within the government, in which Nidaa Tounes, even after having boycotted its ratification in the Parliament, has maintained a higher number of ministries (12) than Ennahda (8), despite the latter still having a greater number of lawmakers in the Parliament. The government has incorporated independents like Rene Trabelsi, the third Jewish minister since independence, prominent figures from the Ben Ali regime like Kamel Morjane, the leader of al-Moubadara, and members of Machrouu Tounes, the party created in 2016 as a breakaway from Nidaa Tounes. This reshuffle gave rise to a divided government with little chance of tackling the country's many challenges, in a political context focused instead on the upcoming 2019 legislative and presidential elections.

The breaking of consensus could be seen in the process of drafting a new Carthage Agreement. Pushed forward to address the political and economic crisis the country was still immersed in

The Social Issue: An Endless Wire

The aim of strengthening the political stability which has upheld consensus between the main political parties has failed to improve the economic situation or achieve greater social stability. The lack of response to the socioeconomic demands that triggered the 2011 revolution continues to fuel regular protests in the country against the government's economic policy and the marginalization of less developed regions suffering from persistent inequalities and high unemployment rates (Hernando de Larrañendi and Thieux, 2018).

The erosion of people's trust in the political system, which is especially important among the youth, is reflected in the number of protests staged through-

out the country. According to data from the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économiques et Sociaux (FTDES), there were 9,356 protests in 2018. Most of these social movements took place in the governorates of Kairouan (1668), Sidi Bouzid (881), Gafsa (791), Tunis (749) and Kasserine (667) (FTDES, 2018). Eight years after the revolution, the same regions continue to be the victims of economic inequality, social exclusion and deficient public services. (Ben Romdhane, 2018).

Another major source of social tension has been the implementation of reforms demanded by the IMF for the gradual disbursement of the 2.9-billion-dollar loan agreed in 2016 to revitalize the country's economy. The austerity measures included in the Finance Act sparked major protests throughout the country in January 2018. The UGTT leads the rejection of the privatization programme, tax hikes and salary reductions for public workers, as instruments to reduce the fiscal deficit. The union, a signatory of the Carthage Agreement, opposed Chahed continuing at the head of the national unity government, accusing him of renouncing "national sovereignty" under pressure from international lenders. The clashes between the union and the government have given rise to sectoral strikes in the education sector and two national strikes, in November 2018 and January 2019, supported mostly by civil servants - which account for around 6% of the country's total population.

The erosion of people's trust in the political system, which is especially important among the youth, is reflected in the number of protests staged throughout the country

References

- AFROBAROMETER, 2018, Afrobarometer Round 7: Survey in Tunisia 2018, <https://afrobarometer.org/publications/tunisia-summary-results-2018>.
- BEN ROMDHANE, Mahmoud. *Tunisie La Démocratie en quête d'Etat*, Tunis: Sud Editions, 2018.
- FORUM TUNISIEN POUR LES DROITS ECONOMIQUES ET SOCIAUX (FTDES), "Observatoire Social Tunisien. Rapport du mois de Décembre 2018 des mouvements sociaux, suicides et violences," <https://ftdes.net/rapports/en.decembre2018.pdf>.
- GOBE, Éric. "La Tunisie en 2016 : La présidentialisation de l'impuissance politique (an II)," *L'Année du Maghreb* 17, (2017): 313-333. <http://journals.openedition.org/anneemaghreb/3293>.
- GOBE, Éric. "La Tunisie en 2017 : Impotence de l'État et tentations autoritaires," *L'Année du Maghreb* 19, (2018): 235-256. <https://journals.openedition.org/anneemaghreb/4305#quotation>.
- HERNANDO DE LARRAMENDI, Miguel and GOVANTES, Bosco. "Las elecciones municipales de Túnez de mayo de 2018: contexto y lecturas," *Análisis del Real Instituto Elcano*, n° 77/2018. www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/mediterraneo+y+mundo+arabe/ari77-2018-hernandode-larramendi-govantes-elecciones-municipales-tunez-mayo-2018.
- HERNANDO DE LARRAMENDI, Miguel and THIEUX, Laurence. "Protestas en la periferia. Contestación y desequilibrios en el Magreb," *Notes internacionales CIDOB* 203, 2018. www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/notes_internacionales/n1_203/protestas_en_la_periferia_contestacion_y_desequilibrios_en_el_magreb.
- INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP (ICG), "Decentralization in Tunisia: Consolidating Democracy without Weakening the State," *Report* n° 198, 2019. www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/198-decentralisation-en-tunisie-consolider-la-democratie-sans-affaiblir-letat.
- YERKES, Sarah and BEN YAHMED, Zeineb. "Tunisia's Political System: From Stagnation to Competition," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 March 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/28/tunisia-s-political-system-from-stagnation-to-competition-pub-78717>.